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Master Weaver from Ghana

Gilbert "Bobbo" Ahiagble
& Louise Meyer

Photographs by
Nestor Hernandez

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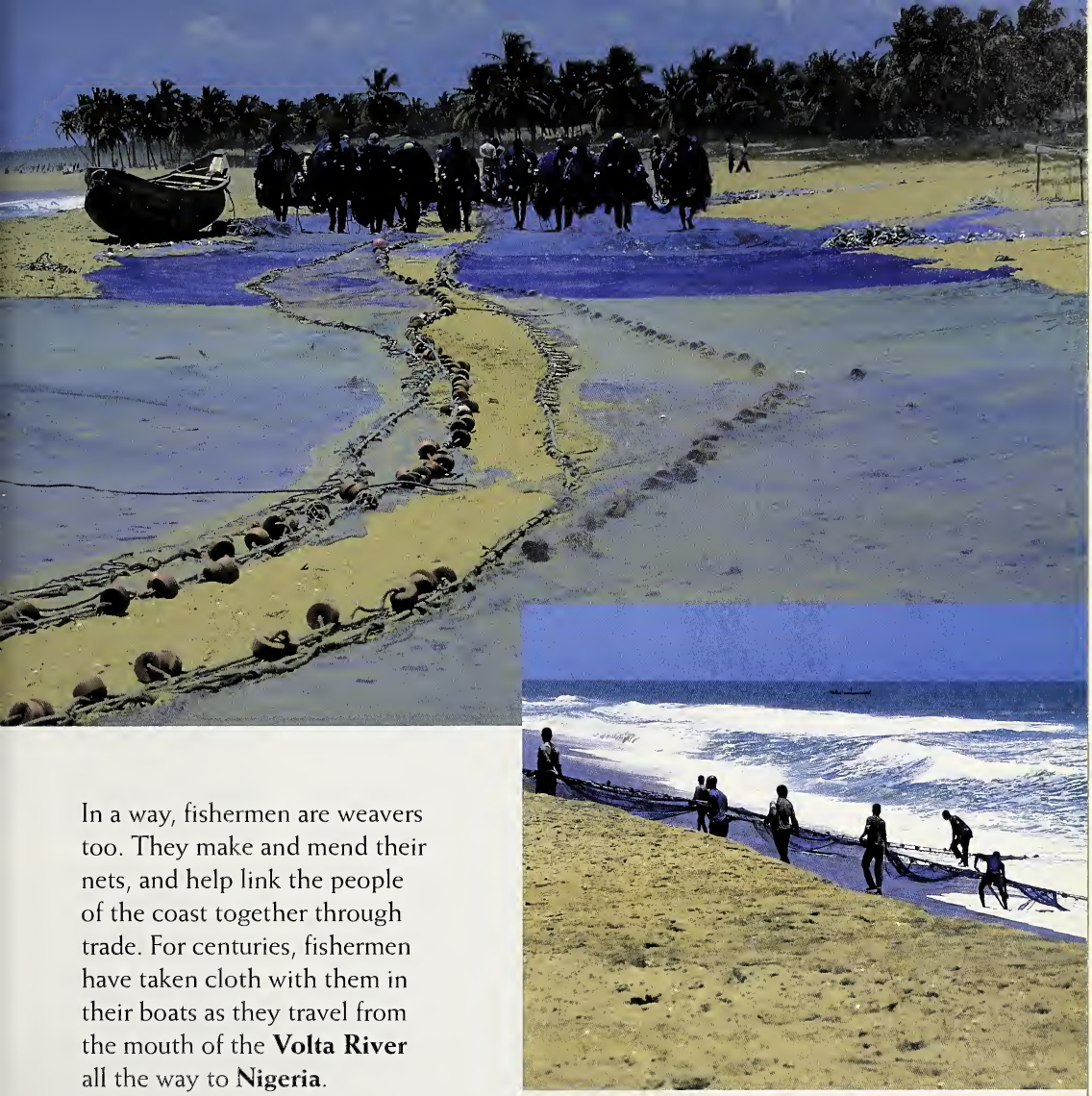
Sea mist and the salty smell of the Atlantic Ocean are part of everyday life in **Denu** (Deh-noo), a village in **Ghana** (Gah-nah) on the south coast of West Africa.

From his family's compound, Kweku (Kweh-koo) hears the waves as they break on the beach, and sees fish nets being cast out and drawn in again full of gleaming fish.

Kweku thinks all men are either weavers or fishermen. All the men in his family are weavers. His neighbors are fishermen.



In a way, fishermen are weavers too. They make and mend their nets, and help link the people of the coast together through trade. For centuries, fishermen have taken cloth with them in their boats as they travel from the mouth of the **Volta River** all the way to **Nigeria**.

Knowledge is passed on from father to son.

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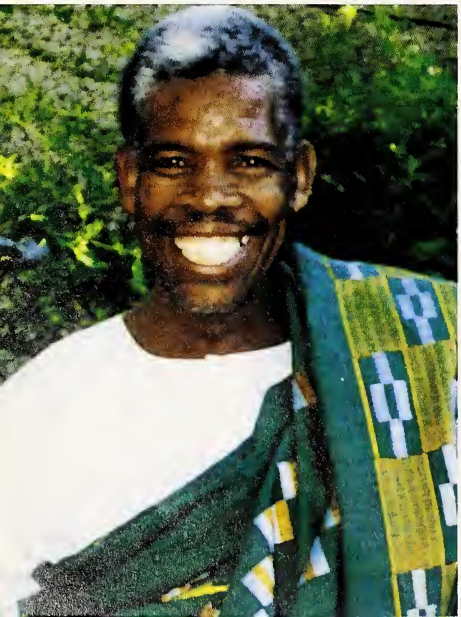
Gilbert "Bobbo" Ahiagble, (Bo-bo Ah-hee-ahg-blay) the master weaver, is Kweku's father. Bobbo, his wife Cecilia, and their extended family live in a large walled area called a compound. Inside are two houses and sandy courtyards shaded by mango and palm trees. The younger children live in one house with Bobbo and Cecilia. The older sisters and brothers live with their grandmother in the other house.

There is nothing more important than the family. They live and work together. They rely on one another. Their lives are woven together like threads on the loom.



Their lives are woven together like threads on the loom.

The women take turns carrying the new baby on their backs

Every four days an open air market is held in Denu. Cecilia buys fresh, ripe fruit and vegetables for her family. Corn, peanuts, okra, onions, tomatoes, starchy cassava root, yams, and peppers are plentiful. The women walk home with their purchases gracefully balanced on their heads.

Kweku loves the delicious meals his mother prepares with the fresh ingredients she's purchased at the market. He especially likes fish. Fresh, salted, smoked, or sun-dried fish are served almost every day.

SHARON GREENSPAN

Bobbo heads the family's weaving business. Kweku is too young to weave, but he has been paying attention. He already knows how to wash threads and wind thread on **bobbins.**

Brothers Grandi and Caphuchi weave after school and during school vacations. Big brothers Cliff and Kwame are weavers. Uncles Kobla, Yao and Kwajo weave, too.

Like fitness training, weaving requires energy, concentration, and skill. The elders say weaving keeps them smart, strong, happy, and healthy.

One thread is weak. Threads woven together are strong!

Uncles Kobla, Yao, and Kwajo work together in the shade.

Weaving together from sunrise to sunset has been the family's tradition for hundreds of years. The family is proud to keep the tradition alive.

Sons learn to weave by watching and helping their elders. Bobbo himself learned by observing and assisting his father in their native village of **Agbozume**, a few miles north of Denu. People come to the busy textile market in Agbozume to buy and sell the vibrant, highly prized **strip weaving.**

Yao examines a strip of weaving.

The people who live in this part of Africa are of the **Ewe** (Ay-vay) culture. They speak the Ewe language. It is believed that they migrated west from **Nigeria** about 500 years ago.

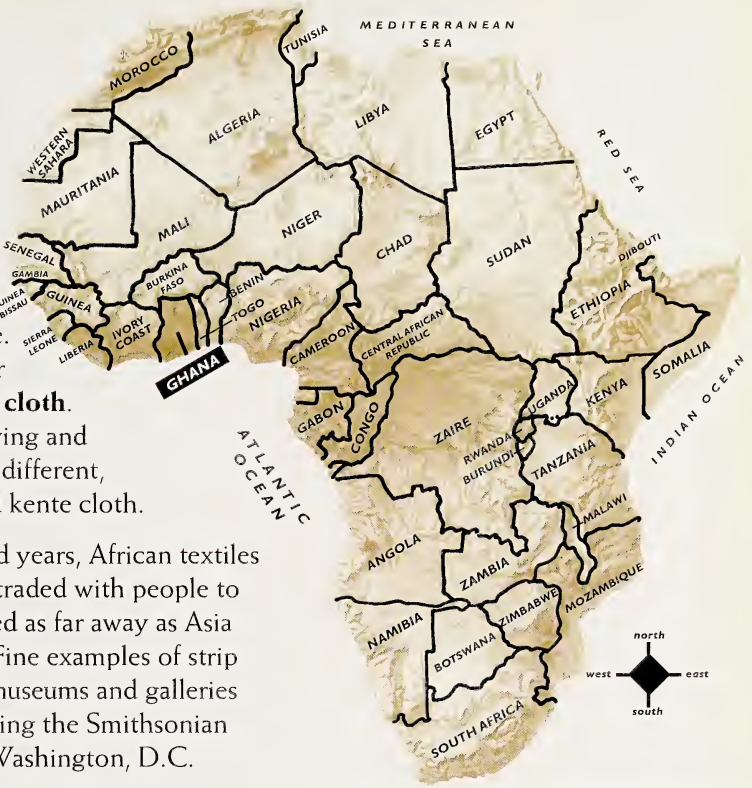
Ewe are hard-working, creative people. For centuries, weaving has been the men's primary art and occupation. There are excellent Ewe drummers and dancers, woodworkers and basket-makers, too. Most people also grow food. At planting time and harvest time, the weavers stop weaving to tend gardens or fields.

Many women have stalls in the market or near their homes, where they sell handcrafts, food, thread, or cloth. Often, it is the women in the family who manage the money.

Kweku's Aunt Awuye sells thread and dyes at the market.

To the west live the **Asante** (Ah-shan-tay) people. The majority of **Ghanaians** are Asante. They are known for their brilliantly colored **kente cloth**. Although Ewe strip weaving and Asante strip weaving are different, both are popularly called kente cloth.

For more than a thousand years, African textiles and treasures have been traded with people to the North. Cloth is traded as far away as Asia and the Mediterranean. Fine examples of strip weaving can be seen in museums and galleries around the world, including the Smithsonian African Art Museum in Washington, D.C.

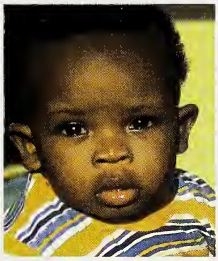


AGBENYEGA ADEDZE

Colorful strip-woven cloth is sold in this market stall in Agbozume.

Ewe strip woven wrappers are worn for special occasions.

Richly patterned Ewe cloth is made from colorful, fine cotton, silk, or rayon thread. The thread is woven into long narrow strips. The strips are cut into even lengths and carefully sewn together to make a large piece of fabric called a **wrapper**. Traditionally, the wrapper is never cut. Men wear it draped over the left shoulder. Women wrap it around the hips to make a skirt, or around the upper body to make a baby carrier.

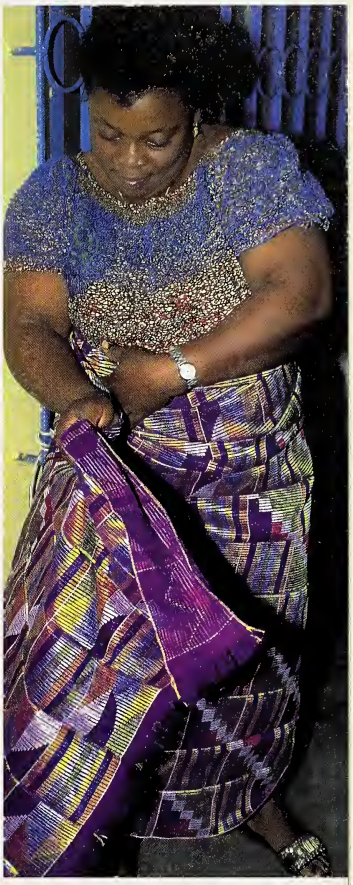


Once made only for royalty and rich people, today many people enjoy wearing it for very special occasions.

Cecilia is putting on her new wrapper. Bobbo wove it for her in honor of the birth of the newest weaver in the family. This is the most beautiful pattern the Ewe know how to weave. It is called "**worgagba**," which means "corn power." Corn is the their most important daily food.

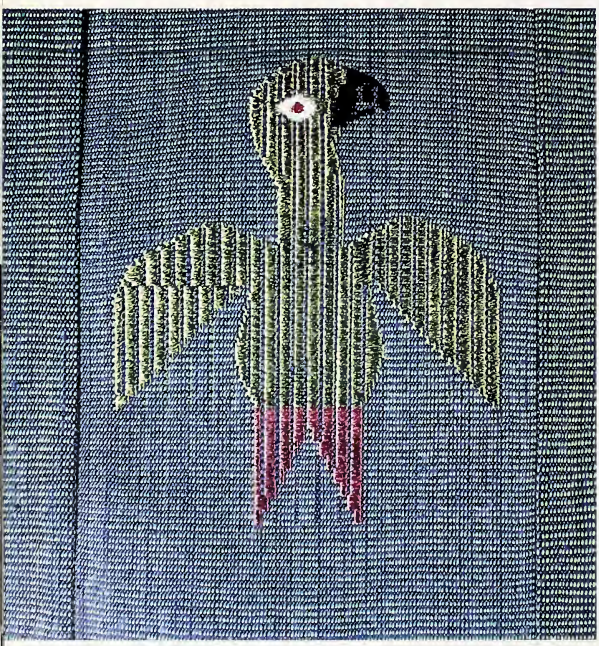
All Ewe patterns have names and tell stories. Each color and design woven into the cloth has its own meaning. Memories recorded in the patterns are shared from generation to generation. Old cloth is especially valuable.

The pattern of Bobbo's big green wrapper is called "**sedavor**," which means "fences make good friends." It is like a map of the old villages, each with its own story.



Cecilia tucks her worgagba wrapper securely around her waist.

All Ewe cloth is "talking cloth."



All Eve cloth is "talking cloth." Children learn about their culture and history through the stories. "Talking Cloth" is Kweku's favorite storybook!

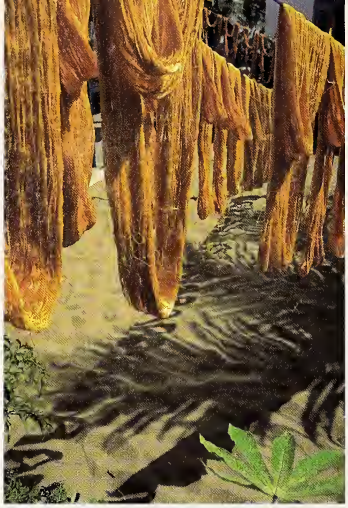
The elegant butterfly is hard-working and punctual.

Butterflies are not lazy. Kweku gets up as soon as he hears his father's footsteps in the early morning. Butterflies are already flying from flower to flower.

The parrot represents the power of nature.

If a person steals the red tail feather from a parrot, the feather will grow back! Nature is stronger than human beings.

Kweku watches patiently as his father **inlays** the design of a goat, one thread at a time. Big brother Kwame shows Kweku how to write the word "**gbor**" (bor) Ewe for "goat", one letter at a time. Kweku tries to write "gbor" and then draws a picture of the family's sturdy little black gbor.

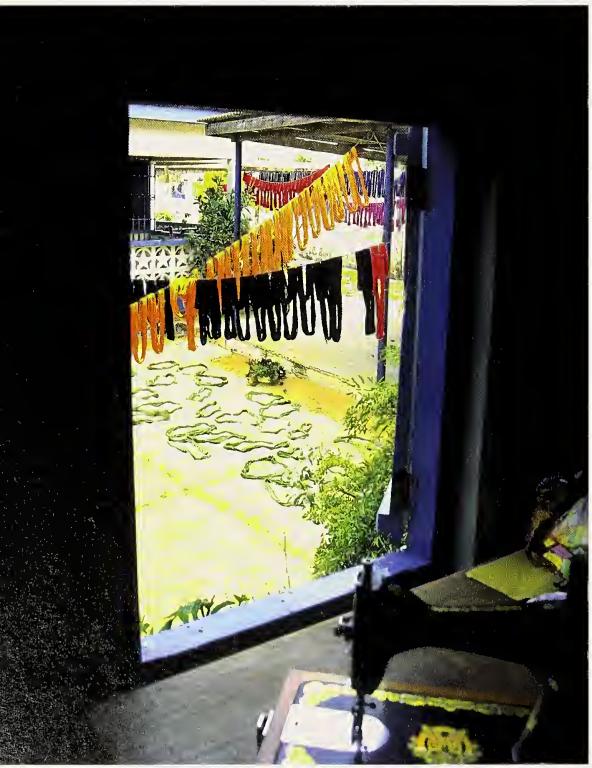


Bright thread loops hang to dry in the sun-drenched courtyard.

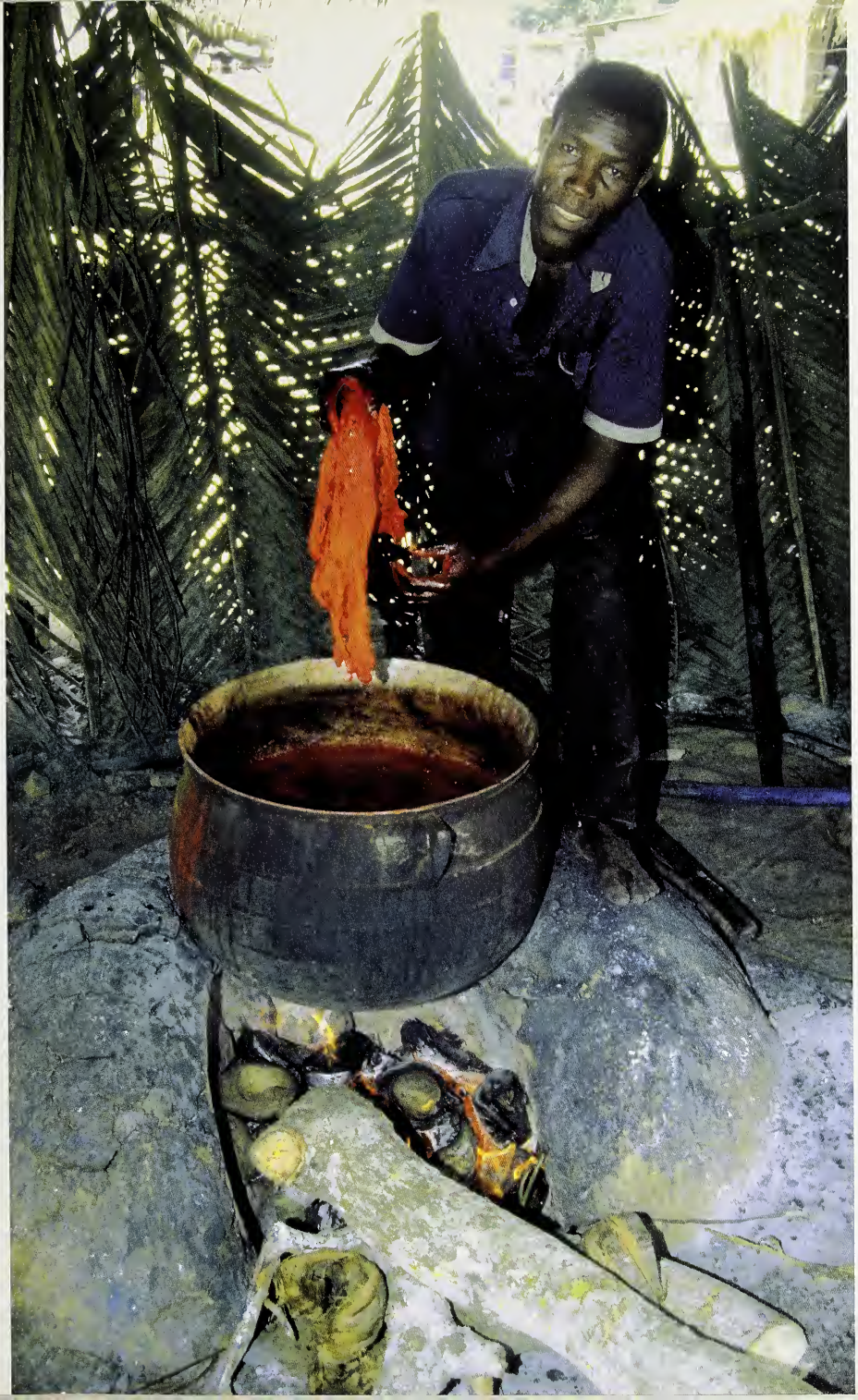
Each piece of Eve strip weaving begins the same way...

The dyer puts clean white thread into a hot water bath. Dye powder is added. When the color is deep enough, the thread is pulled from the bath and hung in bright loops to dry in the sun.

Bobbo prefers to begin with thread that has already been dyed. He chooses the colors and quality he wants from the vast selection at the market in Agbozume. He likes to use cotton thread produced in Ghana, but buys thread imported from Egypt and India, too.



The threads are dyed outdoors in a big kettle on a fire pit.



Under his uncle's watchful eye,
Kweku winds a big bobbin.

The thread is wound on hollow spools called **bobbins.** Each bobbin holds one color of thread. Twelve big bobbins are arranged on the rack that is used to measure enough thread to weave the new strip. Small bobbins, which hold less thread, are useful, too.

Each thread is 400 to 500 feet long! One strip of cloth can be longer than a football field from goal to goal!

These long threads are the warp threads.

There may be as many as 250 threads in the warp. All the threads must line up in a row.

Younger men prepare the bobbin racks. Then they walk up and down the long, covered walkway to lay out the warp threads.

Kwame holds a string **heddle** between his knees. He feeds one end of each thread through a tiny space, like the eye of a needle. The heddles pull the long warp threads apart so the cross threads, the **weft**, can go through.

One heddle controls the even-numbered warp threads. Another heddle controls the odd-numbered warp threads. There are other ways to set up heddles. It depends on which design the weaver is making.

When the weaver creates an **inlaid design**, such as a goat, he pulls the warp threads apart with his fingers.

Each thread also has to go through the **beater**. The beater packs the threads to make a tight weave.

The free ends of all the long threads are carefully rolled up into a beautiful **crown**. The crowns ride on big, heavy drag-stones, placed far away from the weavers.

As the thread is needed, it is pulled toward the **loom**, unwinding as it goes. The stones make marks in the sand like those made by giant turtles.

The loom is the wooden frame that holds all the threads.

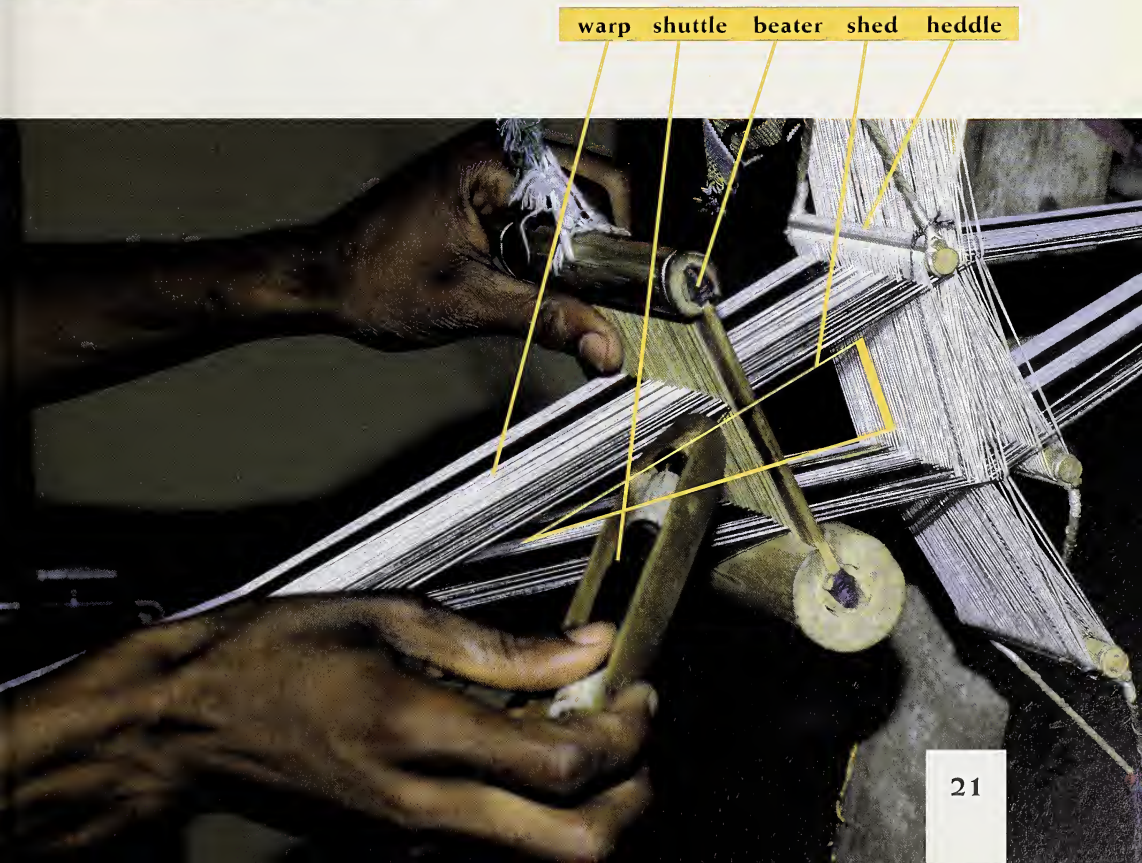
The loom is the weaver's partner. Without it, he cannot weave, so he treats his loom with honor and respect. Every day begins with prayers and songs of praise and gratitude.

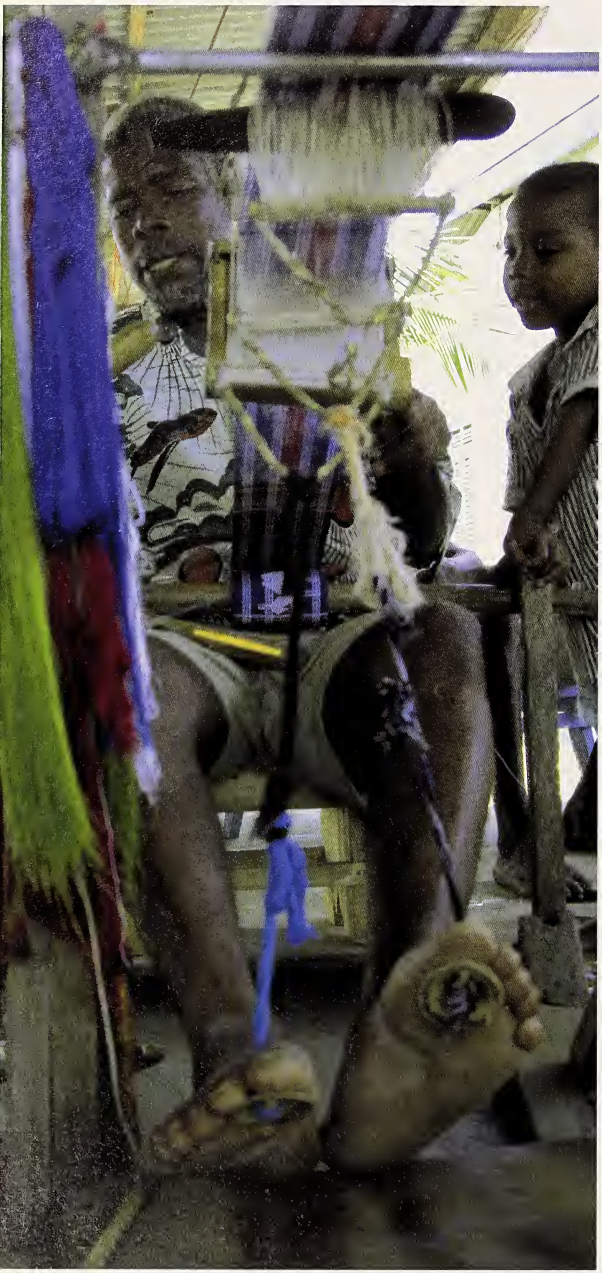
The looms are narrow band **treadle** looms. Weavers work barefoot, using their toes to pull down on the cords that move the heddles. Their feet go up and down, one after the other.

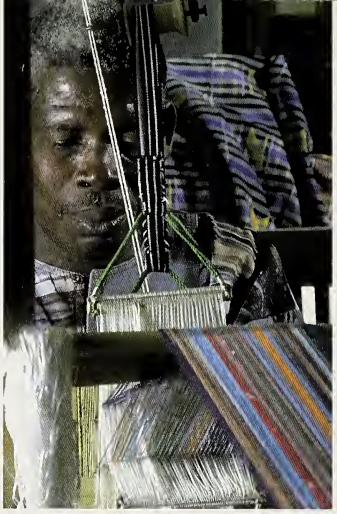
Each time the weaver presses down with his foot, the **warp sets** are pulled apart, creating a triangular space called a **shed.**

The **shuttle** holding the **weft** thread is passed through the shed from left to right. The beater is used to pack it in snugly.

When the weaver presses with his other foot, the warp pulls apart the other way. The weft is shuttled through from right to left, and is packed in again.







DANNY PECK

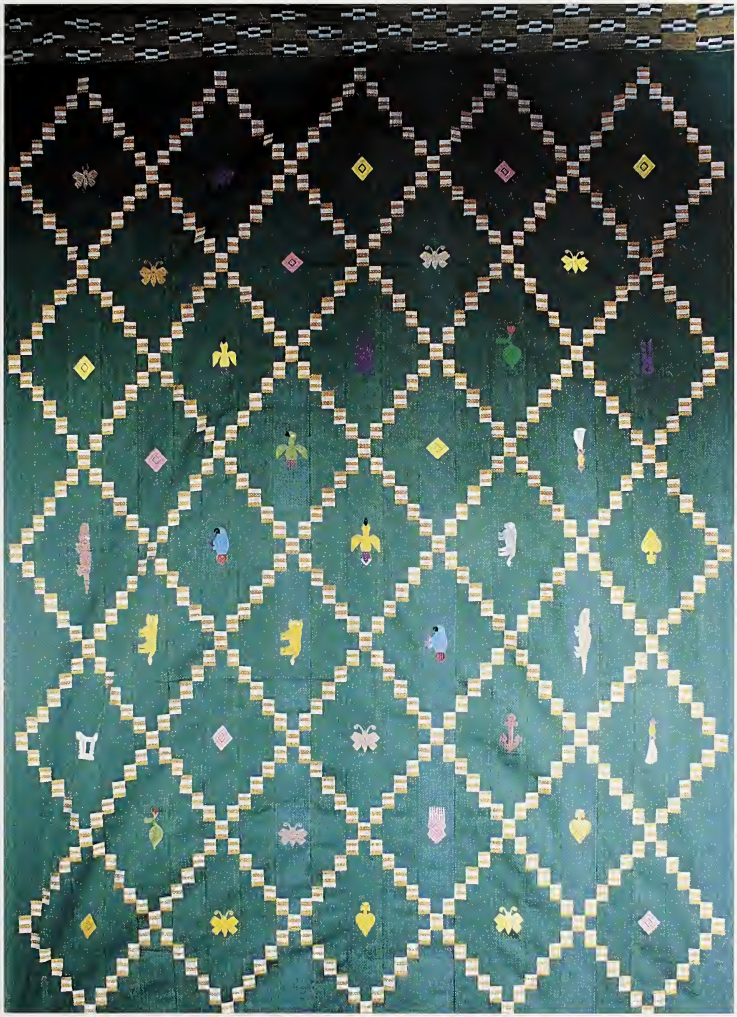
Bobbo concentrates totally when he weaves.

He works quickly and steadily. It takes three to four weeks to weave the long strip for a large wrapper, like Bobbo's green Sedavor with fences and animals.

The patterns he weaves are a time-honored part of his Ewe heritage, but a little bamboo measuring stick helps him make accurate changes in color and pattern.

Sometimes he sings to keep himself company. The song merges with the changing rhythm of his hands as he weaves the stories into the beautiful strip.

Under Kweku's watchful eye, Bobbo uses the shuttle.

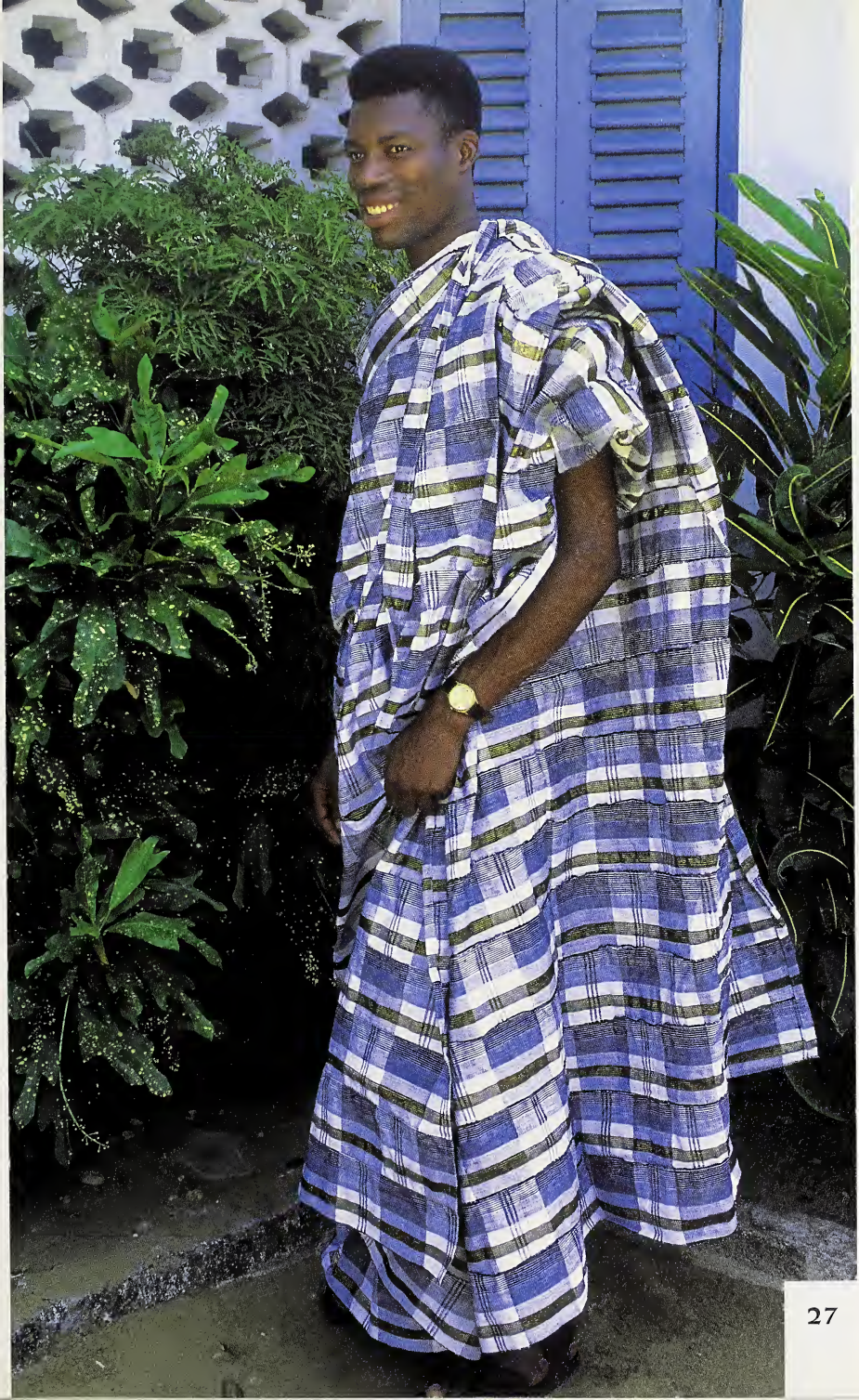


When all the thread in the crown is woven into cloth, the rolled up strip is taken off the loom, cut into even lengths, and stitched together.

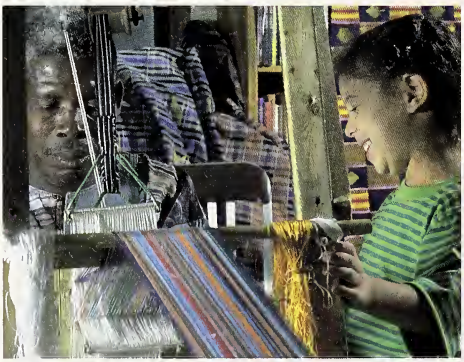
The carefully woven strips have to line up to create the over all design of the wrapper. A man's wrapper is made up of 20 - 24 pieces. Women's wrappers are smaller.

Bobbo's old foot-powered treadle sewing machine does a good job, and is more reliable than his electric machine.

After the strips are sewn together, they do not look like strips any more. They become an elegant wrapper like this one. Kwame wove it himself and wore it proudly at his graduation.



DANNY PECK



DANNY PECK

All the while Bobbo was growing up, his country was undergoing great change. After more than 400 years of rule by European powers, Ghana gained its independence from England in 1957. Bobbo was thirteen years old. The people were proud and happy and there was great celebration the whole year long. Weavers made very special cloth for the occasion.

As a youngster, Bobbo expected he would be a weaver like his father. But as he grew older, he wanted to teach school. His math teacher, an American **Peace Corps** volunteer, had great respect and enthusiasm for Eve strip weaving. Bobbo was inspired by him to continue the family tradition.

Today, Bobbo is highly esteemed as a weaver and as a teacher. His magnificent strip weaving is sought after by people in Africa, Europe, Japan, and North America.

He has traveled to the Ivory Coast, Switzerland, the United States, and Canada to teach traditional West African strip weaving and to tell the stories of his people.

Bobbo's dream is to establish a weaving school in Denu where people from all over the world can come and watch and learn.

• • •

Kweku will soon join his father and brothers at the family looms. His new brother will wash threads, wind bobbins, and watch Bobbo weave threads into talking cloth.

When school begins, Kweku will already know a little English. He's been listening to the foreign guests who come to visit his father.

Kweku is learning...
not all weavers are men,
not all men are fishermen
or weavers, and weavers
can be teachers, too!

The world is a loom that holds countless threads...

Suggested Reading for Children

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Vocabulary

beater ..... bamboo comb used to pack the newest weft thread into place

crown ..... roll of long threads waiting to be woven into the strip

dragstone . big stone that supports the crown

heddle ..... loops that hold the sets of warp threads so they can be pulled apart

inlay ..... (inlaid design) the picture pattern woven into Ewe cloth

loom ..... wooden frame that holds all the threads

shed ..... triangular space made when the warp threads are pulled apart

shuttle ..... tool that carries the thread back and forth to create the weft

treadle ..... foot-operated lever that moves the heddles on the loom or the wheel and needle on a sewing machine

warp ..... lengthwise threads in a weaving

weft ..... cross threads in a weaving

NAMES.... Some, but not all, can be translated.

Many West African children are named
after the day of the week on which they were born.

DAY	BOY	GIRL	MEANING
SUNDAY	Kwesi	Akosua	under the sun
MONDAY	Kwadwo	Adwoa	peace
TUESDAY	Kwabena	Abena	fire
WEDNESDAY	Kwaku	Akua	fame
THURSDAY	Yao	Yaa	strength
FRIDAY	Kofi	Afua	growth
SATURDAY	Kwame	Ama	most ancient

Bobbo ..... Gilbert Ahiagble's nickname means "a big noise."

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LOUISE MEYER is an educator who seeks to awaken interest in the social and economic value of native handicraft. She was working at the Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C. during **GILBERT BOBBO AHIAGBLE's** first U.S. visit in 1975. Later, while working on the Ivory Coast, she arranged an exhibition and workshop for Mr. Ahiagble which stimulated local weavers to further develop international and domestic markets. Ms. Meyer holds a B.A. and M.A. from the University of Maryland, and a diploma in African Studies from the Development Institute, Geneva, Switzerland. She resides in her native city, Washington, D.C. She can be reached on the Internet through www.africancrafts.com.

NESTOR HERNANDEZ was introduced to photography in high school through the Urban Journalism Workshop of the Washington, D.C. Public Schools. For fifteen years he was photographer-in-residence at the Capitol Children's Museum. As chief photographer for the Washington, D.C. Public Schools, he photographed Bobbo demonstrating weaving to school children. While visiting Bobbo in Denu, he first learned to weave, and then took these photos. Nestor is of Afro-Cuban descent. Mr. Hernandez's work is exhibited in Cuba and the United States.

DANNY PECK photographed Bobbo at weaving workshops in Washington, D.C. Danny was instrumental in bringing this book to Open Hand Publishing Inc. Pictured with him is his daughter, Danielle. Now in 3rd grade, Danielle advised Louise on the use of age-appropriate text in "Master Weaver." The Peck Studio in Rockville, Maryland, shared by Danny and his wife Gail, a graphic designer, serves primarily corporate clients.

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